

Guest Voice

March and Birthright plant a seed

Education does not work through coercion, hectoring or remonstration

ELI RUBENSTEIN

SPECIAL TO THE CJN

In a recent *CJN* column (June 3), my dear friend Avrum Rosensweig takes the March of the Living and Birthright Israel to task for not demanding that students act upon the knowledge they acquire during their experiences in Poland and Israel.

Rosensweig feels graduates of the March and Birthright must be transformed into community activists immediately upon their return. Otherwise, he asks, what is the value of these programs?

Allow me to respond.

A central goal of the March of the Living is the transmission of memory from one generation to the next in the very places that unimaginable tragedies unfolded. This process gives a measure of hope and consolation to the survivors and conveys a feeling of obligation and duty to the students to pass on the torch of memory

to the next generation.

Max Iland is a Holocaust survivor who lives in Sault Ste. Marie, Ont. He was a child when World War II broke out, and he owes his life to Belgian farmers who hid him during the war. His mother and three-year-old brother were not so fortunate. Their hiding places were discovered by the Nazis, and both perished at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

In 2014, Max joined the March of the Living. At Auschwitz-Birkenau, he filled in one of the last letters of a Torah specifically donated and written for the 2014 March of the Living. Then, at almost 82 years of age, Max flew to Israel, and without even a night's sleep, climbed Masada with thousands of young people. There, Max celebrated his bar mitzvah, which he dedicated to his brother Kopel's memory.

No student will ever forget the story of Max and Kopel that he told from atop the fabled mountain fortress. No student will ever forget that it's never too late to try to heal the wounds of history. And no stu-

dent will ever forget the look of sadness – and then joy – on Max's face during his bar mitzvah.

If all the March of the Living achieved was this profound moment, this act of comfort that was given to a survivor, *dayeinu* – it will have been enough!

But these exceptionally moving scenes play out time and time again on the March of the Living, with survivors entrusting the memories of their loved ones to their young charges, thereby gaining comfort in the knowledge that the memory of their experiences and the names of their lost family members will be preserved, along with the lessons of this enormous tragedy.

“But what happens after the students return?” Rosensweig asks. Our answer, as my friend and colleague at Birthright Chaia Nadal says, is that “we have planted a seed.” Our experience is that in many, if not most, cases, these seeds take root and blossom in a multitude of positive directions. From our long-term

studies and my own personal experience, I know that March of the Living graduates have spread out far and wide and have gone on to lead exemplary Jewish lives in Canada, Israel and around the globe, involving themselves in any number of Jewish, Zionist and humanitarian organizations. The same goes for Birthright Israel.

Education, I have learned, does not work through coercion, hectoring or remonstration. Rather, it is best achieved through inspiration and setting an example. As the wise pedagogue and Holocaust victim Laura Henschel Rosenfeld once said: “To the educator we say: Do not make demands. Create possibilities.”

I believe the March of the Living and Birthright Israel have created the inspiration and impetus for young people to be committed to Judaism, Israel and tikkun olam over the course of the rest of their lives. I have faith they will change the world.

Indeed, many already have. ■

Eli Rubenstein has been national director of March of the Living Canada since 1989 and is also director of education for March of the Living International.